

Stebbins, Horatio

Oration delivered...
at San Francisco, Cal.
July 4, 1874



Class E 286

Book . 519

1876



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ORATION

DELIVERED BY

HORATIO STEBBINS

AT

SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

JULY 4, 1876.

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ORATION.

FELLOW - CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC AND OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF
CALIFORNIA:

The great movements of mankind upon our globe, since it became the theatre of human life and human events, can never cease to be the subject of profoundest interest and loftiest contemplation. "There is a spirit in man," urging him on with the strong momentum of eternal law, to a destiny that ever allures him with mystic wonder and fascination. The earthly horizon of that destiny, ever retreating, invites him to the full and complete dominion of a world not yet subdued to intellectual and moral being. Generations, races and nations, inspired by impulse greater and mightier than themselves, move forward in grand consentaneous procession, and history unfurls her banners, the symbols of eternal purpose.

One of the most sublime conceptions of which the mind is capable, is the contemplation of the periods of time during which the earth was being prepared to be a fit habitation of man. Compared with those periods, the lifetime of the human race is but a moment, or a thought flashed by electric touch from city to city. The introduction of man upon the earth is a modern event, modern as the morning of to-day! The Egyptian civilization is but of yesterday, compared with the formation of the delta of the Mississippi; and the alluvial plains of the Euphrates, the first abodes of human society, were the work of cycles and æons of unrecorded time. These periods of time and preparation, in the contemplation of which the mind is oppressed with the vague sense of infinity, suggest, with striking intellectual and moral force, the importance of man's place in the scale of created things, and the rank he holds in the order of being: The last term in an ascending series, involved in all that goes before, crown and summit of creation,

end and fulfilment of primal intent and purpose. Science unfolds the order of nature and reveals her method and law, but man, his fortunes, his deeds, his nature and his destiny, are the noblest objects of thought and study. He is superior to nature, in that he recognizes the law of nature and the law of his own being. He discovers truth, good and evil, and is haunted by the thought that not death, but increasing life is his goal. Progressive reason achieves new conquests in every age, and can never rest until it is established upon the throne of the world, and the sublime affirmation is realized, "Thou has put all things under his feet." Man, society, nationality, government, give intellectual and moral import to a material universe, and the progress of history is the elevation of the moral character of mankind.

The American Continent, earliest in geologic time of all the lands of the globe, was reserved to these later days to be the theatre of a new cycle of human culture, and a new display of the power of human society.

The ancient oriental civilizations had flourished for thousands and tens of thousands of years, and sent forth those great migrations that founded the succession of Asiatic Empires, reared the fair forms of Grecian culture and the strength of Roman arms, made Europe the nursery of nations, and England the foster-mother of the modern world. Christianity, that religion which more than any other seems adapted to universal man, had kindled its holy signals on the hills of Judea nearly fifteen centuries before the Pilot of Genoa was born. Rome expired a thousand years before. During all these vast movements of mankind, and through these historic ages, when the soil of the world was being prepared to receive the seed of the Modern age, the American Continent lay concealed behind the horizon. The Ptolemaic system held the universe in the thralldom of the senses, and religion, not yet allied to reason, enforced the thrall. The mind was enveloped in sense, and the sight of the eye, and the hearing of the ear, interpreted the world. The sun rose and set, and the earth was an extended plain. Imagination, strong angel of truth, had not looked with undazzled eye upon that inaccessible glory which the senses cannot touch. The outward manifestations of power filled the mind with vague wonder and fear, while reason had

not yet discovered their law. It was the seed - time of history, the germinating period of human thought.

It is now four hundred years since the European world began to feel those premonitory pains that go before the births of time.

How the great ideas that now govern the world as the common thought of men first dawned upon the solitudes of genius, is beyond the power of man to tell. It is common to account for it in the intellectual law of suggestion or association. Accordingly, we are told that the apple falling from the tree in Newton's garden suggested the law of gravitation. But that is a mistake. The conception is in the mind; the apple does not convey it. It comes as the morning comes; it comes as the ripening of the grain; it comes as the flush of the vintage, distilled in mystery and silence—but behold, a new heavens and a new earth, without noise or fear! The round world, as it lay in the serene imagination of Columbus, is one of the most striking illustrations of the power of an idea that history records. His heroism to obey the idea, and contrary to the opinions of his age, to follow it across the trackless deep, gives him an undisputed rank in the hierarchy of faith, and an immovable pedestal in the temple of earthly fame. Those masterly achievements of fidelity to a thought that characterized the discovery of the New World were fit precursors of the fortunes of that New World, destined as it was to be the field of new principles, in which the majority of mankind did not believe. The birth of navigation may be said to have been simultaneous with the discoveries of the fifteenth century. Among the conquests that man has made over the obstacles that the barriers of the world offer to his progress, navigation must take first rank. It spans the awful abysses of the sea, makes the communication of nations and races possible, supplements human wants by the exchange of the varied products of the earth and of human skill, and tends by its mighty processes of intercourse and communication to establish the equilibrium of the condition of mankind. Navigation was the beginning of that system of communication upon the earth which is the striking feature of our own day, and makes man at home in the world.

A true theory of the solar and planetary worlds had vaguely

emerged from chaos, in the devout reason of Copernicus; and the steady lights of the upper deep became the faithful guides of the trustful mariner, as he ploughed the dark longitudes from land to land. Copernicus did not announce and defend his theory, for fear of the Church, but his mind was the seed-plot of the idea of modern astronomy, and was one of the powerful causes that contributed to the intellectual conquest of the material world at that period. When lying upon his death-bed, and near his end, he united the expression of his devout faith and inspired intelligence in sentiments such as the sacred lyrist has embodied in his verse:

Ye golden lamps of heaven! farewell!
 With all your feeble light,
 Farewell, thou ever changing moon—
 Pale empress of the night.
 And thou, refulgent orb of day!
 In brighter flames arrayed—
 My soul, which springs beyond thy sphere,
 No more demands thine aid.

The two ideas, one of a round world as it lay in the brooding mind of Columbus; the other, of the solar system as it dawned in the intelligence of Copernicus, were the sovereigns of that time.

But there was a nobler moment yet. It may be summed up in that general and somewhat vague expression, The Reformation. In all the complex causes and relations which conspired in that event, the pith and quick of it was that it centered in man himself, and concerned his rights, his duties, his nature, and his destiny. The reformation was to man himself, what the round world and the solar system were to his conception of the material universe. It was the free activity of the individual mind in fealty to eternal, moral law. It brought order into the moral world, by making the individual a centre of power. It abolished authorities imposed from without, and instated the perceptions of reason and conscience within. It appealed from the few to the many; from the priest to the people; from the traditions of the elders to the mind and heart of man. It was not the revival of an old life, but the inspiration of a new; the transfer of civilization to a new centre of development. The old system had completed its orbit; but that orbit was not the complete

cycle of human progress, ever widening its range and rising higher and higher. Men are the unconscious instruments of powers, principles and ideas which they do not fully comprehend. They are the exponents of a period, but they do not originate its principles. It is a mistake to suppose that Martin Luther originated the Reformation, or that he was the father of it in any sense. The Reformation would have come if Luther had not been, and the moral grandeur of his figure in history is derived from his ability to discover the signs of the times, to read the horoscope of the period and confess the era of God. If you inquire for those mighty thoughts and sublime impulses, which are the seeds of human history, you ascend to those heights where genius o'ertops intelligence and insight becomes inspiration. The settlement of this continent by a strong and powerful race, who planted on these shores the seed of a new historic period, was the result of the Reformation. It was a movement that had its origin in the noblest moods of the human mind. Let no cheap animosities between Catholic and Protestant dim the clear, calm, historic vision; let no jealousies of the provincialisms of human feeling intrude themselves into that august presence.

Among the men who contributed by force of moral genius to reduce the chaotic elements of that period to order and form, thus supplying the practical working materials of progress, there is one whose name, and whose principles have been singularly associated with the origin and life of American institutions — I mean the lawyer, theologian, statesman of Geneva, John Calvin. It was he who gathered up the scattered moral powers of the Reformation, condensed them in definite, dogmatic, popular forms, and administered the affairs of religion in a republican spirit, thus making his *horribile decretum fateor* the seed-plot of Republican liberty. If his doctrine was cruel, it was the offspring of a cruel age. It was not Protestant or Catholic that was cruel; it was the condition of the human mind. That terrible doctrine, which now is like the nest of a former year from which the brood has flown, pervaded Christendom, and sent forth a mighty race that fought against tyranny everywhere, always sided with the people, gave victory to the plebeian Roundhead over the lordly Cavalier and sent forth a new Israel to take possession of this promised land of mankind and liberty. Calvinism was dispersed throughout Europe, and

probably influenced more minds than any other system of doctrine or polity devised by man. Scotland was imbued with it, and through her philosophy it tinged the thought of the intellectual world. The Huguenot stock of South Carolina inherited it. William Penn was taught by a famous Calvinist. The early Dutch colonists of New York were of that lineage, and the settlers of Plymouth were of that athletic race.

The system of free schools was devised by Calvin's brain and heart, and beyond the boundaries of sect, his hands, unconscious of its power, scattered the seeds of Republican liberty. As our American Idealist has wove it into verse that shall vibrate on all the chords of time:

“ He wrought in sad sincerity,
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew;
The conscious stones to beauty grew.”

In the hard and thorny husk of a cruel system were hid the seeds of a new life among the nations, and a new era for mankind.

Thus the life of American institutions had its root in the Old World. The health of the scion attests the vigor of the native stock. Whatever may have been the exploits of former races on this continent, whatever power or glory their civilization displayed, they acted no part in the drama of the new era, and contributed nothing to the life of the new age. The traces of the mound-builders are a melancholy record of a race that we may gratefully believe fulfilled its destiny, and had no reason longer to be upon the earth. The native Indian—humble child of the forest, weak and passionate—dashes himself against the walls of the world, or dissolves like ice flowing into tropic seas. American civilization is of European and English origin. It is a new centre of human culture, from a seed matured in the highest and best experience of mankind.

It must be confessed, humanly speaking, that the union of the American Colonies, first against foreign encroachment and then under a constitutional government, was a happy accident. But history distills wisdom and honor and power from human folly. The mad councils of George III lost him his colonies,

but created a new nation. Had a better spirit prevailed, England might have been the mother of the Republic, or two Englands might have ruled the world. The independence of the American Colonies was brought about by those mixed causes, which, to the superficial observer, seem to be an inexplicable jumble of stupid blunder, blind folly and mad self-will. But to the philosophic historian, they are that apparent chaos of human events and human things over which the spirit of order ever broods, bringing forth the true, the beautiful and the good. Evil is never unmixed, and truth enveloped in error, falling upon the furrows of the world, expands, bursts its environments and buds and blooms.

Doubtless there is much vague declamation and would-be philosophic gravity in talking about the "idea" of our government, or the "idea" of our institutions. There is probably no proper sense in which it can be said that Government has any idea or theory at all. Certainly the science of Government, if there is such a science, is not an exact science, and its principles are continually applied to new facts and new conditions, in a new method. The unfolding of a principle is a growth, not a mechanic law. Thus, in all enterprise of man's affairs, in all administration of human things, the grand question is: Is it only a dead fact, or a living law? Admitting fully all the limitations that practice sets to theory, still theory goes before practice, and includes practice. But the only theory, or idea, which a free Government can have, is the growth and development of the principle on which it rests. This is the difference between constitutional liberty and absolute monarchy. The one is the arbitrary application of a rule; the other is the unfolding of a principle. The one is a wooden fact, the other is an inspired truth. And thus in respect of ourselves and our historic origin, as a people and a nation, the question is, What was there at the bottom of this display of social order, that has so gone on where man nor angel never dreamed? The early settlers of the Continent had no conception of it. They brought with them the mature fruit of human experience, the latest that hung upon the branches of the tree of life. That fruit was the conviction, nay, more, transcending all reasoning process, the insight of inspired moral genius, that man's nature prefigures his liberty, and that he is and must be free to act of himself under moral law! That conviction, that insight, was new. The

men themselves did not know what it meant nor where it would lead. And why should they! A man cannot tell even what his house will cost beforehand, and why should they understand the vision of truth that had never been applied to the guidance and government of men? The world had been governed by force, invading even the recesses of thought. Exclusive powers and privileges were held and exercised by the few, and the idea of man as man had no place on earth. Even the Almighty Maker and Ruler had his favorites, and no long - minded eternities of beneficent power brooded over the destinies of mankind. One of the most influential races that has ever lived on the face of the earth, inhabiting a little country on the borders of the Levant, that the modern traveler can "do" in the saddle in five or seven days, made even religion aristocratic, claimed that God was their God, and that they were His people to the exclusion of everybody else. I am not indifferent to the historic development of opinion, nor to the influence of Hebrew Theism upon the destiny of the human world; but it furnishes a striking illustration of the exclusiveness of human thought, associated as it commonly is, with the monopoly of God and contempt for man. But truth mingled with error tends to work itself clear.

When we talk about the theory of free government, we mean, if we mean anything, that the bottom of it is the principle of liberty, as it is elementary and fundamental in human nature. And like other principles, if it is a principle, it is to be followed, and not to be led. If it is based upon the equality of men—that is, the equality of human nature—it is the affirmation that man everywhere is man—made of the same powers, passions and affections; that he has the same origin and the same destiny. The senses are the same in all; intelligence is the same in all; affection is the same in all; reason is the same in all; conscience is the same in all; faith is the same in all. These may be developed in different degrees, and expressed in different terms, but they have their root in the same soil—of the same common nature. As I was riding, the other day in the suburbs of the city, among the sand hills, that form so striking and bold contrast with the cultivated and powerful portions of the town, I met two children, who by their habit and manner, showed that they belonged to the worthy, respectable poor. Their frugal, tidy dress, their unstockinged feet, their modesty in presence of a stranger, flushed the very sand with

loveliness; and in their little sun-burnt hands they held, loosely a few flowers, such as Nature gives in her bounty to relieve her desert places; and they were comparing the colors, as the sunlight poured down its golden rays and filled the urns of beauty. I said to myself, Behold the identity of human nature! The same love of the beautiful that fascinates the soul of a Titian or a Tintoretto! This is what we mean by the equality of men, the identity of human nature. This is the seed of human progress, and the promise of man's destiny. Our Republican Democracy is founded on that. It has always encountered suspicion and jealousy and evil foreboding from those who are not imbued with it; for if there are those who are too ignorant and wretched and benighted to be free, there are those, also, who are intelligent, yet who lack the moral genius to discern that they belong to the human race.

The history of the country for the hundred years on whose summit we now stand, has been little else than the development of this principle. On these mighty waters the nation sails, and the horizon forever recedes and earth and sky never meet. Our principles, so far from being exhausted, are only beginning to be unfolded, and we may justly expect that they are to play a leading part in the fortunes and destiny of mankind. If human progress means anything, it means the enjoyment of the highest privileges and immunities of existence by all; it means a fair field for every man to pursue that line of thought and action which his own individuality directs, and which, to him, is the purpose of his being. All truth is expansive, and greater than men think when they first adopt it. The smallest seed of liberty when it is sown becomes a tree, and struggling human aspirations take refuge in its branches, or refresh themselves under its shadow for new resistance against ancient and venerable wrong. He who would confine the influence of free institutions to this theater of our display, would make a great mistake. The winds are its messengers, the lightnings do its biddings, the ocean is its mediator. The heart of man, source of restless imaginations and never satisfied longings, aspires to it from afar.

It would be impossible, on an occasion like the present, to recount the events, the deeds, the persons of this century of republican liberty. That is the office of the historian, the philosopher and the poet. It is enough for us to-day to take counsel of our

principles and reaffirm them as the profound conviction of our minds, attested by the experience of a century. It was announced a hundred years ago by the founders of the government that all men are free and equal. We have read it to day from the famous Declaration, and it will be read by those who shall come after us down the rolling tide of centuries to the latest recorded syllable of time. It is no contrivance of extemporaneous device; it is no rule for the exigency of the moment, cheap subterfuge of tyrants. It is in the eternal nature of truth, and things, and man and God. Neither is it any vagary or "glittering general-ity" in our minds but of clear, decided import and energy. It is as old as the heavens, and as new as to-day, and we claim for it that immortality that belongs to essential truth.

We affirm and declare to-day, as the fathers did in 1776, that all men are free! And we mean by it that fundamental fact of human nature by virtue of which man is man, endowed by heaven with the power to choose between good and evil, and to direct his course towards those ends that seem to him best! We mean that the office of Government is to protect that freedom, and not to encroach upon it; to throw around it the environments of law, that under law it may be liberty indeed!

We affirm and declare to-day, as the fathers did in 1776, that all men are equal! Hear it, O Heaven! and give ear unto it O Earth! We mean by it the identity of that nature whose inspirations of reason and conscience are the same in their eternal quality and divine essence! We mean that reason is reason, that conscience is conscience, that imagination is imagination, and that the progress of mankind is grounded in this common nature of man. On this we base our hope of human progress, and our faith in human destiny. Does experience give any ground for that hope and faith?

Human society on this continent for a hundred years, has been led forth under the power of the principles which we affirm and declare to-day. A continent has been subdued to culture. A degree of external human comfort has been attained and enjoyed, that probably has not been surpassed in any portion of the earth, or in any period of history. Let us cheerfully accord whatever is due to the cheapness and fertility of the soil, but let us also be just to human energies. The results of scientific research have been applied to the arts of life, and whatever par-

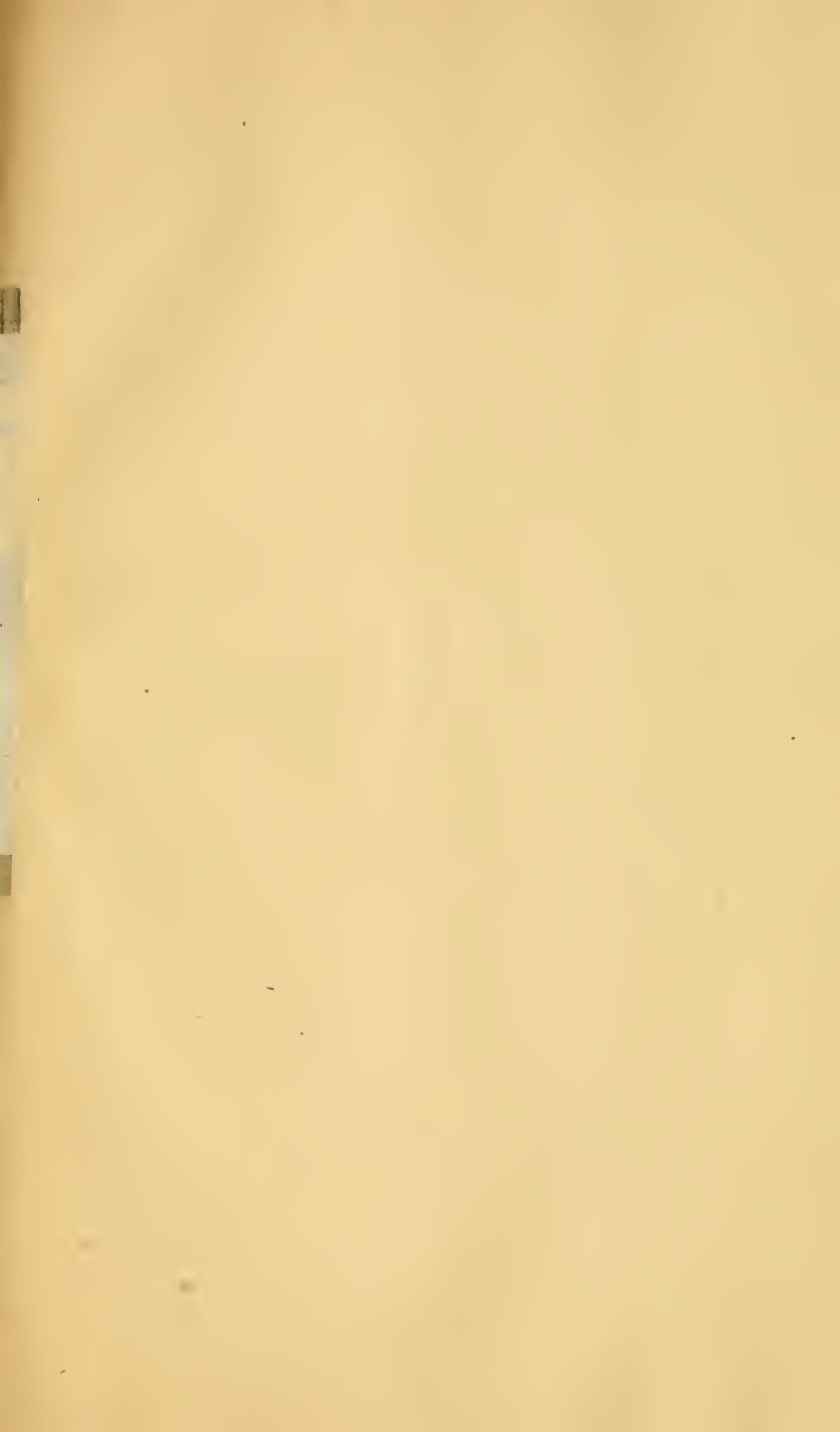
tains to man's conquest over the material world has been made as complete here as in any other country. The area of the country has been extended by peace and by war until its borders are laved by both oceans through twenty degrees of latitude. The country to-day presents a theatre of world-grandeur for the display of free Constitutional Government.

The affairs of the Government have been administered by those whom the people have chosen. Universal suffrage makes revolution unnecessary, by giving every man the right to appeal to the ballot as the final remedy of all public wrong. We have never had under this plan a wicked or dissolute president, and if we ever had a weak one, the people have been steady enough to endure his weakness, conscious of their strength. We have never had a corrupt or mercenary Judge, and the judicial mind and ethic of the country, I speak firmly without boasting, compare favorably with the judicial mind and ethic of Christendom. The bad inheritance of slavery, bequeathed to us from the ancient estate, we esteem no longer a portion of the nation's wealth and have absolved ourselves from its obligations by the blood of the sons of men. We have received from the nations of the earth and the islands of the sea, more than five millions of men, welcoming them to fairer opportunities. We have entrusted religion to the religious sentiments of human nature, without the interference or support of the State, and the free contributions of men surpass the tribute of regal splendors.

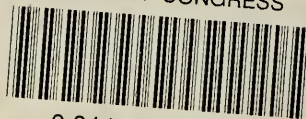
We have laid the foundation of a system of education for all in making the public school free, and in making it secular. Its benefits are only beginning to be felt, but the mind of the country is awake, and we may expect the best results of a system that has an ideal excellence beyond any present practice. We live in obedience to order and law, without violence; and good feeling and good manners shed their invisible, mighty protection over all. American society has never required a standing army to enforce order upon the people. We feel that the Government is steady, because its base is broad—reaching to the freedom and equal rights of every man—and that, in the long run, the laws which the people make themselves they will respect.

Governor! please accept my respectful salutations and the salutations of the people! The occasion is worthy the presence of the first citizen of the Commonwealth. One hundred years

ago the foundations of this city were laid by the ancient monarchy of Spain. It was reserved for another age and another race to carry forward the civilization which you now witness, and which you have the honor to represent. If the principles which I have rehearsed are true; if the attainments that have been made under them are a just expression of their wisdom and power, we may take pride and gratitude in our citizenship, and renew our vow to the freedom and equality of men. Let mighty salvos proclaim it! Let banners wave in proud homage and triumphant joy! Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof! Let us bid the future generations hail! Hail ye happy races yet unborn that shall receive such an inheritance! Let the people lift up their voice: Yea, let the people lift up their voice: *Te Deum Laudamus.*



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